

THE INVITATION OF THE CHURCH.

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A

SERMON,

PREACHED IN THE

CHAPEL OF YALE COLLEGE,

APRIL 4th, 1858,

BY

THEODORE D. WOOLSEY.

*Clark*

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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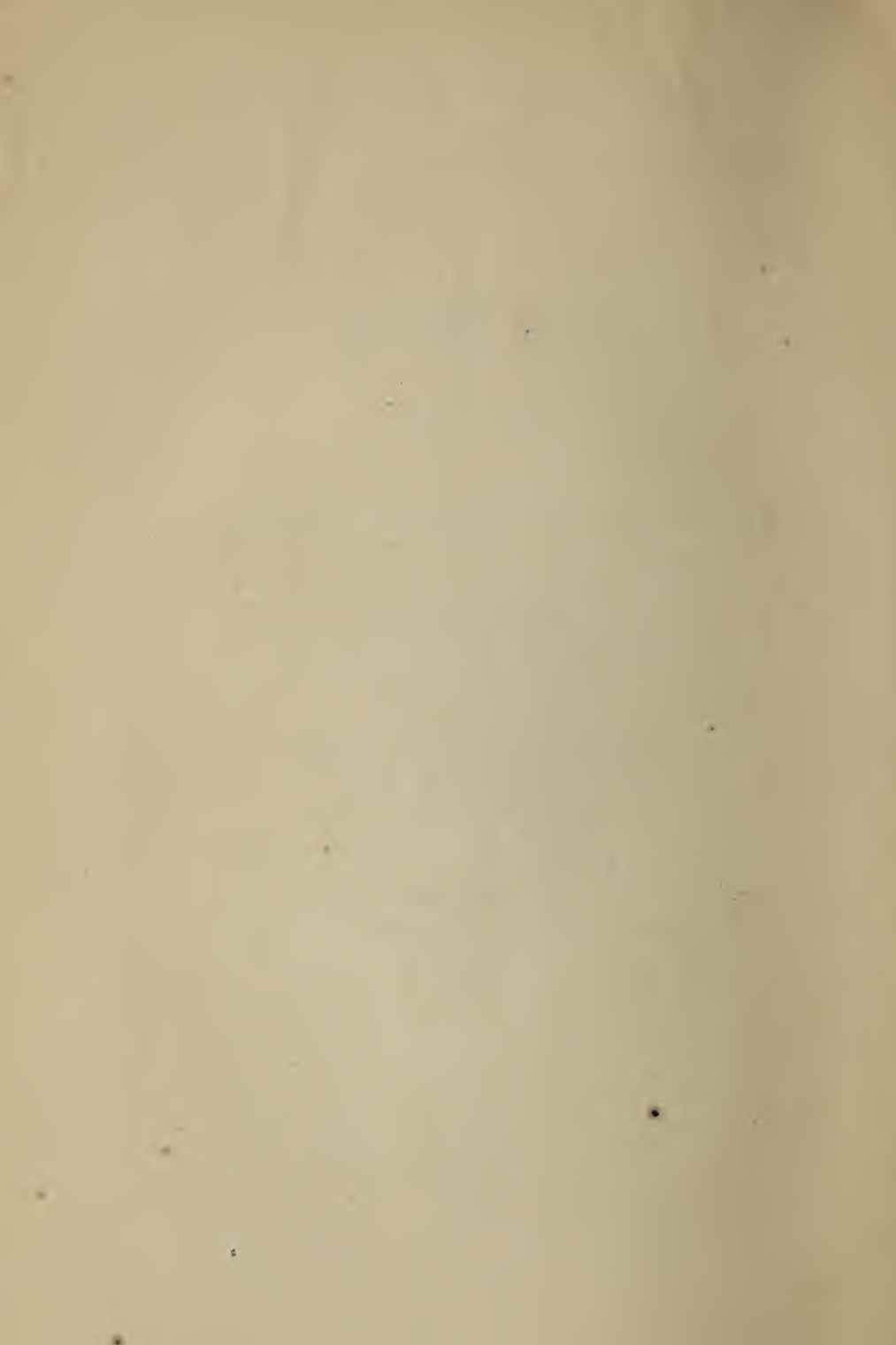
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## DISCOURSE.



NUMBERS, x. 29.

AND MOSES SAID UNTO HOBAB, THE SON OF RAGUEL THE MIDIANITE, MOSES' FATHER-IN-LAW, WE ARE JOURNEYING UNTO THE PLACE OF WHICH THE LORD SAID, I WILL GIVE IT YOU : COME THOU WITH US AND WE WILL DO THEE GOOD : FOR THE LORD HATH SPOKEN GOOD CONCERNING ISRAEL.

THESE words of invitation, addressed by Moses to his relative, can be used without doing violence to their spirit, as an invitation of the Church to men in the world around them. It is one of the treasures and the beauties of the Bible that the old dispensation was fitted to prefigure and reflect the new. Hence, although it has passed away and given place to the more glorious economy of Christ, its facts and institutions are still fresh and living, having Christian truth engrafted on them. Thus Israel represents the Church ; the desert stands for the pilgrimage of this life ; the river of Jordan for the stream of death ; Mount Zion for the celestial city. In fact, we can scarcely talk the language of religion, still less the language of religious feeling, which shows itself in sacred poetry, without having recourse to expressions borrowed from the history of God's ancient people.

Having thus a right to make such use of our text, we shall regard it as equivalent in meaning to one of the closing passages of the New Testament,—“the spirit and *the bride* say come.” The bride, the Church, says come with us and we will do thee good, whenever any of its members, in its spirit, like Moses, invites his friends to partake of its blessings ; whenever any of its ministers invites those who are out of its fold to enter and taste of its security and its blessedness ; above all, when by its sacred symbols of a death which unites God's scat-

tered people in one, it calls on all to join themselves to Christ and to the society which he has instituted among mankind.

Standing over these sacred symbols this day, I ask you in the name of Christ's people, as Moses asked Hobab, to go with us. We are journeying through this world to a place which God has promised to give us. Join us, for we will do you good; for the Lord hath spoken good concerning his Israel.

In this invitation which the Church makes to those who belong not to its society, it appeals, as Moses did, to many of those who are connected with its members by various natural ties. When the Christian commonwealth is gathered out of the world, its citizens do not emigrate to some happy valley or sequestered plain where a perfect polity can be established; they do not pass away at once to the heavenly city, but stay, as they were, amid all the relations and sympathies of this earthly life. Loves and companionships touch their hearts as before, only they desire a *better* portion for their friends, even that which they have found themselves. Conceive of yourselves, therefore, my friends, as surrounded with those who do not, because they have found a better portion, lose their interest in you; who do not give up their regard for earthly friends because they have found heavenly ones. It is characteristic of Christianity, that when it reclaims one mind from a world of sinners, it implants the desire in him to persuade others to share the same joys and hopes. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, first found his own brother Simon and said unto him, 'we have found the Messias.' Philip findeth Nathanael and saith unto him, 'we have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write;' and when Nathanael began to hesitate, Philip saith, come and see. As soon as Saul of Tarsus became a follower of Christ, straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues—that he is the son of God. This type of primeval Christianity must be found more or less in all who receive the same truths and partake of the same spirit. Is it strange then that your friends here around you—that your companions, your classmates, should have the same desire for you, should ask you to join them, should rejoice when you comply? Is not what you have seen here within these few days the in-

evitable result of Christian feeling ; and even should you decline, would you not be forced in all honesty to say that they felt and did what they ought, that if they were unsuccessful and possibly unwise, they were at least friends to you ?

Thus the Church through all those ties of love and sympathy which keep the world together, invites men to join its brotherhood. Let us now consider, after the order of the text, to what, and why it makes the invitation.

I. To what does it invite ? This is told in the words, *we are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you : come thou with us.*

Translated into the language of the New Testament, these words intend, *first*, that the followers of Christ are simply *journeying* through this world without regarding it as their dwelling place ; *second*, that there is a place beyond it, made known to them by a divine promise, where they hope to arrive ; and *third*, that no one can reach that place who does not join their company.

First, *they are merely travelers through this world.* The conviction is not confined to the Church of God that there is nothing earthly worth the soul's best affections or highest pursuit, but every thoughtful philosopher, every serious poet has partaken of the same feeling. But a marked difference between them and Christians is that the latter are practical and definite, while the former are filled with vain dreams, or proud contempt of the world, or moody despair of anything better. Another marked difference lies in the moral and religious aim of Christians. The *world* they view as a state of blindness and sin ; themselves as having been under the bondage of sin : having obtained a little illumination from Christ, the light of this world, and longing for holiness, they pass through the world as a place where all their capacities are weak ; their hungerings for righteousness ungratified ; their struggles with evil unsuccessful ; their nature incapable of finding true rest. Through such a world, beautiful to the eye but disappointing to the soul, they are passengers.

My friends, it might seem bad policy to talk thus of the world when we are asking you to set out with us on your journey to



eternal life. But I ask you to weigh well your powers, your aspiring hopes, your "thoughts that travel through eternity," your boundless desires, the essential everlasting need of God's love, or of something equally great to satisfy your longings; weigh well these unchangeable facts, and decide for yourselves, whether *any* thing or *all* things worldly can content you if they are chosen as your portion. Stretch your scale and measure endless life, and say whether an immortal being in the remote cycles of his existence can be blessed without God for his inheritance. Eternity—God! There is some proportion between the ideas. Eternity—the pleasures of this world! there is none. Share our views then of this world, of its solemnities, of its grand issues; and if the pilgrim spirit thus engendered is full of seriousness, it shall be full also of sublimity; it shall be a worthy lodger in your soul; it shall by and by grow into a glorious joy.

*Again*, when the Church of God says, we are journeying to the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you, they declare themselves to be hoping for, preparing for, hastening unto heaven. In saying this I do not mean that they place heaven vaguely before their eyes as a state of mere bliss. Oh, how many have seen heaven thus through a haze or taken something else for it, and never reached the true city of God. Heaven to Christ's flock is something more, or else it would be nothing. It is the manifestation-place of God and Christ, the dwelling of the sanctified, the harbor of safety from sin, the climate and soil for the soul's boundless growth, in all excellence. And therefore it is a place of rest and of bliss. Such a place God has told them of. Such a place alone could induce them to travel as pilgrims through this world.

And, further, when the Church says 'come with us,' they express the conviction that there is no attaining to salvation but in their company, by the means which they employ. By this, they do not mean that a person may not become a true follower of Christ afar from ordinances and fellowship, alone, as on the sick-bed, on the sea, or in the wilderness. Every man in one act, must be alone, as far as his fellow-men are concerned: in the great decisive act of cordial faith and conse-



crating love, he must do all of himself, and no Christian nor Church can do aught except help him in the preparatory steps. If he shrinks back from such a crisis himself, all the sympathy and companionship in the world can do nothing for him. What they mean, however, is this ; that as they are followers of Christ, so every one who would go with them and attain to everlasting life, like them must be a follower of Christ, and must begin his journey by a personal act of reliance on, and self-consecration to Christ. Without this, there is no oneness of aim, no share in the same promises, nor common hopes, nor true communion. If a person expects to attain to holiness of life in any other way, he departs from the path of Christ's church, and either he or they are utterly deluded. There is no process of self-discipline or self-culture, no resoluteness of will to live a good life, no philosophy, or religion, or benevolence which, without this foundation, will not lead you at once to a wide divergence from the path of Christians—which will not alienate you from them and finally make you bitterly hostile.

II. In the second place, why does the Church invite men to join her ranks? The answer is given in the words 'Come with us, for we will do you good, for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.' She invites in order that in sympathy with her, and through the means to be found within her pale, men may partake of those blessings which God has pledged to her in the promises of his revelation.

The polity of God's ancient people was peculiarly free in admitting new comers into its ranks, by what may be called its law of naturalization. Take a passage from one of the prophets, for an example. "Also the sons of the stranger that join themselves to the Lord to serve him and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it and taketh hold of my covenant, even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon my altar; for mine house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." The congregation of Christ shows the same open-hearted desire that all should par-

take of its blessings. It opens its doors for every stranger who has become a friend, who has the same desires and aims with those who already have believed in the promises of God. And why should it not? How could it do otherwise? Since its members are not such by birth nor by the will of man, but by a new birth of God; and each one already within its enclosure has entered in the same way. It would be to deny its nature and annihilate itself, if it looked to any other additions than those of free self-moved, believing minds.

Let none suppose then that this willingness to have its numbers enlarged springs from a sectarian spirit. There is such a spirit in the world, and even among true Christians; but overruling, at times quenching it, there is a spirit of broad Christian love which rejoices in the success of all bodies that are loyal to Christ. He is a weak Christian, or none at all, who cannot feel this.

Nor let it be thought that the Church in making its invitation, 'come thou with us,' is seeking for credit and eclat in the world; and on that account is willing to receive all who offer, into its fellowship. The new members whom it seeks are those, whether few or many, of whatever former character or life, who by whatever process or experience of heart, slow or quick, clear or ill-defined, have freely come to this simple point of welcoming Christ as the Savior from sin and condemnation. It seeks for these or none. It would rejoice to see highly endowed persons join its society, but rejects them if they cannot be in harmony with its essential Christianity. It wants no half Christians, knowing well that one such may do more harm than two true disciples of Christ can do good, and that an open enemy is better than a pretended or indifferent friend.

Its motives then point not back to itself, but outward to the good of those whom it invites to join its society. Let us proceed to consider some of the particulars in which that good consists. 'We will do thee good.' 'The Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.'

1. *In fellowship with the Church of Christ there is the best opportunity of gaining a sure knowledge of divine truth.* It is

freely admitted that no age, sect, church, or person has had truth free from admixture of error in his possession; it is granted that the best Christians must leave a multitude of questions unanswered; that very many passages of the divine word are of doubtful meaning; and that the divisions of the true church have differed greatly in opinion from one another. It may be that this will continue to be the case until the end of time. It may be, if there is to be an age of greater light, purity, and union, as we confidently anticipate, that even then no solution of many of the questions, which embarrass speculative minds, will be discovered. And yet, notwithstanding all this, we say that in fellowship with Christians there is a fair prospect of being established in all essential truth, while a mind which departs to a distance from that fellowship cannot avoid darkness, doubt, and unbelief.

In weighing the good to be derived from intercourse with Christians as a means of establishing yourselves in the truth, consider that no one is sufficient to settle the system of truth by his own unassisted powers; that the evidence of religion does not suggest itself in the abstract form only, but also, and much more, in the concrete; and that the Church has been putting to the test the practical value of the truth since the days of Christ.

(a.) Let no one think in his pride that he is able to judge correctly of religion without aid from his fellow men, who have thought deeply on the greatest of all subjects. Let no one determine in his self-will that he will untie for himself, unhelped, every knot before making his way to Christ. Such thoughts are as foolish as they are dangerous. The philosopher who, if it were possible so to do, should throw away every rope of connection with other speculators, or with the practical world, would sink in the floods of falsehood: the webs he wove would be like the conceptions of children. Nor is it possible to come in entire isolation, with perfect independence, to the study of religious truth. A man imagines not what old prejudices, what false assumptions, what oft-refuted exploded errors cling to him, if he thinks alone, in spite of all his carefulness. Many a person has carried in his mind for years

what he thought an unanswerable objection to religion, which a little converse with others has put to rest at once.

(b.) But again, religion to be judged of fairly needs to be looked at in the concrete—in the life of religious men, as well as in its forms of abstract statement. We test the principles of all religions in this way, and convict them of falsehood when they appear as corrupters, rather than as benefactors, of mankind. We ask concerning each, What is its mode of operation on human life and character? Has it or has it not a power to raise the soul which acts by it, above the dominion of sin and earth? Does it satisfy those spiritual hungerings, which man's nature has always carried within itself, and which must, in the end, cause the rejection of a religion which does not give them a lasting supply? Does it furnish food for man's intellect in any ratio to the capacities with which he is endowed, or will he outgrow it, as he becomes advanced in knowledge? Does it quicken or deaden his conscience;—having satisfied his longing for pardon, does he now commit sin with greediness because salvation is easy, or live a holy life because he partakes of the character of God his Savior? Does it enlarge a man's affections or shrink them up? Does it rid him of fear, or leave him a prey to terrors at the awful hour, when he is just going before the face of God?

I invite you, my friends, to come into close intercourse with the followers of Christ, and decide whether the answers to these questions will be favorable or not to the truth of the Gospel. Select the best among your Christian friends, and determine whether his virtues are in spite of his religion, or the natural fruit of his religion? Or go back to the Savior from whom, as the germ, all truth, as we claim it to be, and all goodness, have flowed down through the ages of the Church, and then say whether all this can be a system of falsehood? Decide whether any other religion known to mankind can produce such results.

(c.) I add, that the Christian Church has been testing the value of the doctrines on which it is built ever since the days of Christ. It has had a longer time to examine the effect of principles on character than almost any philosophy or any intelli-



gent religion besides ; it claims to have satisfied the wants of man, and to have produced characters of consummate virtue. If this claim had turned out to be false, Christianity, as it rested on its native excellence for its defense, could not have survived the third century. If those men, like Justin Martyr and many others of the early Church, who carried in themselves a longing to be delivered from sin, and had tried philosophy only to abandon it,—if they had found in the Gospel also no power to sanctify, no suitableness to their wants, no quickening of their spiritual natures, and had given up this, too, in despair, I am bold to say that Christ's name long ago would have dropped out of history, and the very Gospels have been lost.

Enter, then, my friends, into communion with Christians true to their profession, and they will place before you the truth ;—they will give you the best evidence of the truth which you can obtain, until by actual taste and experience you set to your seal that God is true.

2. But, secondly, the Church will do you good by its assistance in enabling you to overcome sin and to make progress in godliness. This help it secures to those who share its society in various ways,—*one of which is that it affords you a shelter among godly companions, against temptation.* Great as the plague of our evil hearts has been in itself, it has been mightily strengthened by the suggestions of sinners. We may remember a time perhaps, when an evil practice was caught, like a pestilence, from some companion, or when an evil suggestion acted on our principles like a poison. Thus, if we come to Christ, we come, with weakened, unstrung characters : “ we are made to possess the sins of our youth.” The principal struggle of the young Christian is with sins that have grown rampant, or with bad habits of thought contracted in the time of his folly.

In circumstances like these, how great is the blessing which Christ has ready for us,—of a society where we may be safe from a large part of our temptations ! We have their sympathy. “ There hath no temptation taken you,” saith St. Paul, “ but such as is common to man.” They have fought on the

same ground, they have stories to tell of wounds and victories, they have encouragements for the desponding combatant. The friends of our period of sin are generally glad when we run with them to the same excess of riot, for they need our countenance and support ; but the friends who welcome us to their Christian society, rejoice in our success,—have support to give, and when we fall help us to rise.

*Another* good of this kind, to be secured by union with Christ's Church, is *progress* in Christian virtue. Christian virtue is morality in the highest sense of the term, or love to God and man dwelling in the heart, and expressing itself in all right and useful actions. To secure this virtue there is a storehouse of motives drawn from the love of God in Christ, such as exist and influence men nowhere else. These motives, under the superintendence of a divine spirit, secure a high standard of character, a multitude of bright examples, an amount of joy and peace strangely great for this world. If now, without some divine command, the members of this society should separate and live each for himself without a thought for his neighbor,—should live for instance an ascetic life of solitary contemplation, they might be perhaps virtuous and godly ; but how much of the power of love, of friendship, of example, of mutual support in manifold ways, would be lost. The individual, for his perfection, must live in society ; the Christian for his perfection, must live in the fellowship of saints.

We invite you then, say the true followers of Christ, to enter our society, because you shall not only be safe, but shall abound also in facilities for your religious improvement. We are, if sincere, the salt of the world ; we are organized to glorify our Father in Heaven. Help us in the work of Christ, partake of our spirit of devotion to the service of God and the welfare of man, come within the reach of all that which cheers and purifies our communion ; thus, and thus only, can you attain to true goodness.

III. I have time to turn for a moment only to the last consideration by which the invitation of the text is enforced : “for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.” This brother-



hood of Christians, which is journeying to a commanded place—which has an organization able to do such great good to those who join it, is also marching under great and precious promises, as under so many joyful banners. The journey, the result, are not left to the spirit of the society, but God hath spoken—hath promised good concerning the followers of his Son. Look with me for a moment at three of the most comprehensive of His promises, which contain and convey good beyond calculation. *He hath promised pardon.* In the death of his Son he proclaims the free remission of our sins, deliverance from condemnation, a state of acceptance before Him, and thus the foundation for a trustful and hopeful life. What good can come to you without pardon; and if you lie under the curse of unforgiven sin, will not all blessings, all knowledge be steeped in gall? *He hath promised strength, the present aid* of the spirit of his Son—called the Spirit of promise—in which is comprised rich and most manifold good;—light for the ignorant, advance in holiness for the sinful, support for the weak, comfort for the desponding, joy in affliction, hope in fear, transmutation of all seeming evils into blessings. *He hath promised also success;* of which indeed the present spirit is an earnest. This success in its completeness is salvation—ultimate and everlasting deliverance from sin, joy in the favor and work of God, rest in the spiritual body and spiritual companionship of heaven. Are not these great and precious promises indeed, worth the attempt to secure them, and are not the members of Christ's true Church, to whom they are pledged, blessed indeed?

And now, my friends, what answer will you return when in the name of Christ's disciples I ask you to join this fellowship, which, all imperfect as it is, contains whatever is most good and true within its pale, and has such glorious hopes for coming time? Some, I trust, are ready to say, we hope to partake of the blessings of this society even as we believe that we have joined the Lord in a private covenant never to be forgotten. But another will say I have no interest in the principles or relish for the employments of the Christian Church. I have my plan of life which is inconsistent with its requirements,

and which I cannot relinquish. Another still will say, safety and virtue can be found in other paths. I mean to reach heaven without help of Christian people, by a road of my own. And another still will say, I mean to be a Christian before I die and to have all the blessings which Christ has promised, together with all those which I can reap from a worldly life. Well, my friends, if such is your settled purpose, we must part; we cannot give up our Leader or our mode of life, or our hopes. We are now together at a point in the road where several paths diverge. God grant that after trying one of them you may find us on our way again before night fall. But while you are leaving us in purpose, and before the voices of farewell and entreaty lose themselves in the distance, before forests and floods intervene, we pray you to reflect that a man cannot go to heaven *when* he will, or *as* he will; that peradventure you may find that God will not welcome you, or that you cannot be happy in the Church in heaven, whose temper and principles on earth you refused to adopt.

